

Bonnie Wheeler
Charter Oak State College

Good evening, Senators, Representatives, and members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Bonnie Wheeler and I am a 49-year-old mother of three and a longtime resident of Torrington, CT. I am currently in my senior year at Charter Oak State College. Like many continuing education students, I didn't decide on what I wanted to study until later in life. My wonderful experiences as a mother and human service provider prepared me to seek a degree in the behavioral sciences.

I began my college journey at Northwestern in Winsted and then transferred to Torrington UConn in 2010. Although I had struggled with chronic health conditions my entire life, I didn't know that I had a rare genetic disorder (Vascular Ehlers Danlos Syndrome) until my aorta dissected. That one event set off a long list of severe medical complications that have permanently changed my body. Suddenly, my college goals were put on hold and my sole focus had to be surviving. In 2014, I was placed into hospice care and told by my doctors to make peace with the inevitable direction of my illness. Fortunately, with time, I did grow stronger and was able to graduate from hospice care. With my new physical limitations came a challenge I wasn't sure how to manage—how would I safely return to college?

I still have trouble walking and my cognitive functions have made verbally communicating slower. Due to the aneurysms in my brain, I've recently developed a seizure disorder that has complicated my health further. Despite these issues, my dream of finishing my degree still remains. It's a dream that I didn't think I could make happen until I learned about Charter Oak State College.

When I discovered that I could complete my degree through this wonderful college, a whole new world opened up to me. Despite my physical and cognitive issues—the unique design and support at this little college have helped me become a happy, productive, and proud part of the Charter Oak family. Having access to college classes through an online format takes into consideration my accessibility concerns, grants me the potential to develop marketable skills, and provides a comprehensive education. Each of these factors will allow me to successfully contribute to the nonprofit sector.

I want to be a Charter Oak success story and I know that my fellow classmates feel the same. Please continue to fund Charter Oak State College so that access to quality education can continue for the many men and women with similar challenges who have a great deal to offer our state. I know that this college has opened so many doors for me and I would love to see other residents of Connecticut experience the same opportunity.

Thank you for your time and the ability to share my story with you.

Sincerely,

Bonnie Wheeler